

6. Conclusion

In the 2020 Netflix docu-series *The History of Swear Words*, host Nicholas Cage suggests that disparagement, humiliation, and deprecation “can cut, soothe, delight, frighten, insult, and seduce. [...] [They] are the most popular and alluring taboos we have” (1.01, Netflix, 2020). The existence and topic of such a documentary series acknowledges and reinforces the popular appeal of disparagement at the current moment.

As I demonstrated in this book, female-led contemporary US American situation comedies employ disparagement, humiliation, and mockery as major sources of humor and as narrative devices. In order to comprehend the complexities of popcultural disparagement, this study carved out exactly these deprecating phenomena and proposed that it is vital to introduce the concept of invectivity. Against the backdrop of existing research on situation comedy genre conventions, I employed invectivity as a novel research perspective to take precise stock of exemplary invective strategies in the respective series. I presented three approaches to examine disparagement in contemporary sitcom formats as well as the dynamization of the genre since the turn of the millenium. With the help of the analytical category of invectivity, I gained a novel perspective on exemplary female-led 21st US American sitcoms and began to grasp the developmental dynamics of the sitcom genre that, as I argued, are sustained by a back and forth of affirmation, reflection, and disruption of invective conventions. In addition, I demonstrated that the storytelling of these respective sitcoms frequently revolves around moments of debasement and ridicule in order to fuel laughter. Since sitcom laughter is frequently based on superiority theories of humor where an individual laughs *at* another one, power imbalances are established and judgment concerning someone's inferiority is passed. In this regard, my research focused exclusively on the textual, audiovisual, and narrative elements and structures of my material that invite audiences

to laugh. I argued that invective humor can be read as the grounding of the genre and can function as a catalyst for the exploration of the genre's self-understanding and its boundaries. The analytical category of invectivity enabled me to not only describe by way of example how popcultural practices of disparagement mirror awareness of social hierarchies, but also to analyze how the formal poetics of the material enable and structure its cultural work. While some series largely adopt symbolic abuse to affirm invective conventions, others make it a point to reflect on and question them. I detected invective strategies that claim inauthenticity in order to be protected from criticism (*Mike & Molly*), that intricately question socially sedimented systems of gendered inequality (*Parks and Recreation*, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*), that commodify and politically capitalize on disparagement (*Roseanne*), and strategies that radically revert invectives and counterpose them with Super Niceness (Michael Schur's oeuvre of situation comedies).

In the previous chapters, I made it a point to examine my corpus' sitcom texts along their poetics and politics, especially how these two represent interdependent dimensions. In the first analytical chapter, my analyses revealed how invectivity can hinge on discourses of alterity. Utilized to elicit humor, deprecation and humiliation are able to cement hierarchical differences between the self and others following superiority theories of humor that describe an imbalance of power between the laugher and the laughee. Manifold pleasures can be drawn from disparaging formal, narrative, and aesthetic patterns in the respective texts. The reading of *Mike & Molly* emphasized the symbolic abuse of its fat protagonists. I argued that Invective Fools, heavily flawed supporting characters with distinct invective licenses to speak, are employed as an authorizing strategy to enforce supposedly socially sanctioned norms and devalue undesirable behaviors and bodies. Moreover, the reading of *2 Broke Girls* examined the auto-invective strategies of one of the show's female protagonists and connected them to gendered traditions and legacies in the comedy circuit. What was exploited as a strategy to circumvent gate-keeping mechanisms in the male-dominated domain of comedy is now argued to challenge socially reinforced regimes of gender inequality. While delivering distinctly on this matter, the two texts both predicate their humor on disparaging imbalances of power and discourses of 'otherness.'

The chapter on reflexive invectivity allowed me to examine situation comedies that not only make invective humor a subject of discussion, but

that also utilize this reflection on invective strategies as a major source of humor. The chapter concentrated on one particular cluster of sitcoms connected to the auteur figure of Michael Schur, namely sitcoms described by the Comedy of Super Niceness, which reflexively champion humor based on sincerity over humor based on cynicism. By exploring the genre's self-understanding through one central exemplary text, *Parks and Recreation*, the first section reads the notion of Super Niceness and its radical reversal of invectives as a divergent and distinct outbidding strategy from a perspective of media economics. The second section argued for Super Niceness as a tool to replace the humorous pleasures of invective transgression that are often associated with postmodern shows, with the humorous pleasures of sincerity and genuine human interconnection in contemporary sitcoms. Finally, the third section highlighted the disparagement in Super Nice sitcoms that is directed at white, male, middle-aged characters in order to reflexively negotiate their solidified privilege and to deliberate legacies from the sitcom past. All three subchapters shed light on one exemplary cluster of sitcoms that reflexively deconstructs invective strategies and radically reverses them.

Finally, the last analytical chapter zoomed in on the distinct dynamism of the sitcom genre and the breaking down of formerly stable and rigid structures, arguing that invective strategies play a significant role in the genre's boundary work. The analysis of the mockumentary sitcoms *The Comeback* and *Parks and Recreation* examined embarrassment as an authorially-staged invective strategy to elicit humor. Furthermore, embarrassment is utilized as a social control mechanism. The reading of the dramedy *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* demonstrates the significant role of invectives in the fusion of dramatic and comedic elements. While the protagonist's invectives in her stand-up comedy are portrayed as an escape from and a breaking free of the pressures of traditional gender roles, invectives are also used to bypass moments of narrative conflict, and they reflexively ridicule and expose prevailing gender inequality. Lastly, the analysis of the 2018 revival of the hit-sitcom *Roseanne* connected a focus on media practices and institutions to invectivity, demonstrating that nostalgia for familiar invectives can be part of a political strategy by network channels to tap into larger audiences. The three texts can, thus, be read in the context of how they align the genre's traditional features and conventions to changing political and social constellations. The recent formal and narrative developments of the sitcom genre that I exemplified in the case studies of this chapter indicate a *Quality Turn* in comedy. The diversification of the

ensemble cast, the mixing and hybridizing of genres, and the weaning of the “comedic impetus” (Mills, *The Sitcom* 5) enable, as Zoller-Seitz argues, an “infinitely more tonal and aesthetic variety [...] than in any comparable list of dramas you could put together” (Zoller-Seitz).

The three previous chapters taken together established the analytical and conceptual productivity of invectivity as an analytical category to inquire into contemporary US situation comedies and American popular culture in general. The chapters fleshed out three individual starting points for analyses – discourses of ‘otherness,’ reflexive invectivity, and dynamizing invectivity. Yet, they are also complexly linked to each other, establishing, for example, that the same text (in this study, *Parks and Recreation*) can be utilized for the discussion of distinct invective conventions: reflexive and dynamizing invectivity. The structuring principle of this book, then, enabled me to analyze distinct aspects of invective conventions in rather loose clusters while making room for the possibility of overlaps. Invectivity, as an overall analytical category, proposes to fill gaps in scholarly research, highlighting the rather unattended popular appeal, the formal poetics, and the cultural work of disparagement, devaluation, and deprecation in American popular culture. By exemplarily demonstrating how the discussions and examinations of invectivity intertwine with core question of American studies, this project hopes to contribute impulses to American popular culture studies, humor studies, and cultural narratology.

Even with a large-scale study of exemplary ways of dealing with invectivity in contemporary US sitcoms, there were various elements and aspects that this book could not take into consideration. Further research could, for instance and besides the obvious departure from female-led comedies, concentrate on other focal points and perspectives, including a comparative analysis of invectivity in sitcoms with and without laugh tracks, a closer look at sitcoms that focus on the excessive use of invectives (e.g. *Veep*, *Don't Trust the B— in Apartment 23*), or an examination of invective strategies in sitcoms that include video-game-like interactive viewer participation.¹ Facilitated and assisted by the analytical and conceptual work of this project, further exploration promises to accentuate and broaden this line of research.

1 In 2020, Netflix's sitcom *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* released an interactive special, “Kimmy vs. the Reverend,” in which viewers can direct the protagonist by remote control through the storyworld.

As this book demonstrated in the preceding chapters, sitcoms are contingent on invective structures. For this and many other reasons, the genre is in a state of flux, suggesting a *Quality Turn* in comedy that could reevaluate the genre's battered reputation. As Matt Zoller-Seitz suggests

We may be headed toward a future where the labels 'comedy' and 'drama' and 'hour' and 'half-hour' no longer tell us anything useful about a show, and we'll have to think about them, live with them, in order to figure out what they are. No joke. (Zoller-Seitz)

